

Staying Sane Through Transition

by Dallas Denny

Gender reassignment is one of the most radical and disruptive things that an individual can do. It strains and often severs social relationships, imposes economic hardships, involves a good deal of physical pain and a great deal of psychic pain, and requires study and hard work in order to even begin to hope to pass in the gender of choice.

Society and the specific disapproval of loved ones, the reluctance of the medical community to provide services, a scarcity of resources, and countless legal and social obstacles. The body of one sex must be somehow whipped into the semblance of that of the opposite sex, generally after puberty has wreaked irreversible somatic changes. Old behavioral patterns must be unlearned and new ones added. A new life must replace the old.

The transsexual person runs a gamut of obstacles, with no guarantees of success. In their gender transition, probably fewer than ten percent of those who set out to change happily and successfully working and living in the gender of choice. And yet, tens of thousands of people are just can't be



Transition is possible. It can be done. It can be done without disruption and sacrifice and hard work. It can't be done without stubborn determination. It can't be done without money. It can't be done in the absence of support, and it can't be done without pain.

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My crossdressing friends tell me that the transsexual people they know are no fun: "They whine all the time. They're preoccupied with their problems and their bodies. They need to lighten up." To them I say, "Please appreciate the tremendous pressures that these people are experiencing. Please understand that every aspect of their lives is affected by their decision to change gender, and that they must become somewhat self-absorbed in order to prevail against odds which are nearly insurmountable." And to those who are in transition, I say, "Lighten up!"

I don't have the space in this article to point out all the potential hazards in the mine field of transition. OUR SORORITY simply isn't big enough. ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA isn't big enough. You'll have to look elsewhere for that (you'll find a listing of such resources at the end of this article). I do have some strategies and approaches that may be of help. Here they are.

1. **Keep Your Sense of Humor (and if you don't have one, cultivate one).** You will only be as unhappy as you allow yourself to be. You can plod miserably along, or you can enjoy yourself. You can find humor in the ludicrous situations you will find yourself in and the things people will say which have a whole different meaning because of your gender status. Those you meet along the route will prove amusing, if you allow them to be. They will be your comrades in arms and some of them will become your friends. If you approach transition with a sense of wonder and awe, your experiences will be more pleasurable than they will be if you inject fear and guilt. Yes, it'll be damn difficult, but you can still have a good time. Being miserable and depressed does not make for a good prognosis.

2. **Don't Allow Transsexuality to Become Your Entire Life.** You shouldn't go through transition as if you were Ahab in pursuit of the White Whale. Ahab needed to get a life, and so do you. You mustn't defer your entire existence in anticipation of a hypothesized bliss once you jump genders. An empty life in the gender of original assignment will probably become an empty life in the gender of choice. Reassignment will not solve your problems; you'll still have the same troubles, but in a different gender. You would do well to have life goals other than transition. You should cultivate friends and interests outside the gender community.

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3. **Keep Your Perspective.** You must not allow your transsexualism to become a fantasy or a fetish. As my friend Rachel has said, "You must weave reality back into the fabric." Don't place undue weight on reassignment surgery; it won't magically transform you into a man or a woman. You should at all times know where you are and where you are going, and this should be firmly grounded in reality. You must come to terms with your physical and behavioral assets and liabilities and incorporate them into an emerging identity. You must have realistic ideas about the social roles of men and women, and what sort of man or woman you want to be. Remember that transition is a process-- a becoming, if you will. You will be gradually changing. You won't just wake up one morning and find that you are magically different.

4. **Don't Box Yourself In.** You must somehow keep functioning. If you prematurely dismantle your old life, you will be unable to replace it with a satisfactory life in the gender of choice. You will be left with a twilight existence, an identification as a transsexual. And if this negatively impacts your earning potential, you can get stuck, unable to complete the procedures which will produce the bodily changes necessary to successfully pass in the gender of choice (for instance, electrolysis for the male-to-female; reduction mammoplasty for the female-to-male). You must maintain as much support as possible. You should know that in some cases that may mean clinging onto your old identity a little bit longer.

5. **Let Go of Your Crutches.** As your body changes, it will become less difficult to pass. You should rely less on contrivance and incorporate your natural aspects into your presentation. This may mean using your own hair instead of a wig, doing away with padding, and using less makeup. Or it may mean using your birth name, if it has a chance of working, instead of an idealized feminine name. It may mean becoming comfortable with interests or aspects of your personality that aren't a good "fit" in the gender of choice. But whatever your perceived shortcomings are, you will need to face and come to terms with them and let them go.

6. **Sacrifice and Compromise.** Being in transition will cause big changes in your life. You must be prepared to meet all challenges and to give your transsexualism a high priority. You'll be deluding yourself if you think you can maintain your previous standard of living in the face of bills from psychologists, endocrinologists, electrologists, and plastic surgeons. You must maintain your pace. If you delay procedures such as hormonal therapy because of lack of money or time, or for other reasons, your transition will eventually be delayed. And here I will insert a caveat for the male-to-female transsexual person: Don't put off electrolysis. You'll be sorry if you do. Once you are living in the gender of choice, it will be nearly impossible to bring yourself to grow the hair long enough for the operator to grasp it with her tweezers. And passing will be at best a struggle, and quite likely impossible, until the hair on your face is gone or at least appreciably diminished.

7. **Be A Good Consumer.** You must at all times act with discretion and proper respect for your body. You should not act out of desperation. Although services can be difficult to obtain, they are available. You will minimize your chances of failure if you use competent service providers. Otherwise you will risk delays in obtaining diagnosis (and hence hormones), a regimen of hormones inadequate to masculinize or feminize you, and even botched surgery. You have only one shot at transition, and it is decidedly in your best interest to proceed with reasonable precautions and care, making sure that your doctors know what they are doing.

8. **Join a Support Group.** It will be to your advantage to find your peers. Support groups can educate you, assist you with referrals, and help you to perfect a masculine or feminine appearance. You will probably make friends with other group members. But more importantly, you will see your peers in action, making decisions both good and bad. By observing them, and by talking with them, you can learn strategies for coping and avoid pitfalls.

9. **Follow the Benjamin Standards of Care.** The Standards of Care of the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, Inc., are guidelines to safeguard transsexual people and those who provide services for them. Many transsexual people see them as obstacles to be overcome, and so they are. But by following the Standards of Care, you will minimize your chances of failing in your transition, and maximize your chances of surviving failure, if it does occur. The Standards will let you opt out anywhere short of reassignment surgery. The best of transitions will be painful. The worst do not even bear thinking about. You should not expect a perfect experience, but by exercising common sense and foresight, you will minimize disruption and conflict, and have a smoother ride.

SOURCE: AEGIS/Dallas Denney, M.A.